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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to add further legitimacy to the growing number of career counselors who wish to engage clients in an in-depth exploration of their family's influence on their career choice. Until recently, information about the influence of the family of origin on career decision making has not had much impact in the career development literature or career counseling technique. Strategies are suggested for career counselors to organize data on the different influences of the family of origin on the career decision making process. Utilizing this approach, counselors can deepen their clients' career counseling and life planning process by understanding the many ways that family background, upbringing, support, and conflict affect career decision making. With appropriate guidance, clients can engage family members more frequently as supportive partners in the career counseling process. (Contains 10 references.) (GCP)

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Family Matters: Influences of the Family in Career Decision Making

by

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Family Matters: Influences of the Family in Career Decision Making

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Introduction

Last year, I published a paper advocating that career counselors take into account the different influences of the family of origin on the career decision making process. To enable counselors to do this, I established two new protocols (Chope, 2001).

Building on that work, the purpose of this presentation is three fold. First, it is to add further legitimacy to the growing number of career counselors who wish to engage clients in an in-depth exploration of their family's influence on their career choice. Until recently, information about the influence of the family of origin on career decision making has not had much impact in the career development literature or career counseling technique.

The second purpose is to suggest a strategy for career counselors to organize data on the different influences of the family of origin on the career decision making process. Utilizing this approach, counselors can deepen their clients' career counseling and life planning process by understanding the many ways that family background, upbringing, support, and conflict affect career decision making. With appropriate guidance, clients can engage family members more frequently as supportive partners in the career counseling process.

The third purpose is to provide useful illustrations demonstrating the importance of family influence in career decision making.

While career counseling is clearly neither personal counseling nor family therapy, it is heavily intertwined with information that is frequently deeply personal and connected, developmentally, to family influence. Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen (1996) spoke to this noting that in two generations of her grandfather's children there are three nurses and nine physicians; as a little girl she thought that "you became an adult and a doctor as part of the same process." More recently, Mary Jacobsen (2000) showed how the dreams of parents, often unattained dreams, shape the career choices of their offspring.

Career counselors tend to short-circuit information about their clients' families. And, perhaps worse, the clients frequently recollected, tortured memories of the predominance their parents, or other family members, had on their career planning process are often glossed over or dismissed in the career counseling process. This attitude may be due, in part, to the lack of an established standard for counselors to follow in assessing the role of the family in the process. But it is also a reflection of the meager training career counselors receive in intertwining family issues with career issues. Moreover, many interns in career centers report that they aren't

"allowed" to discuss personal or family issues in their career counseling process.

This presentation moves toward creating a more intensified focus on the process of gathering information on pertinent family matters.

Earlier Attempts At Recognizing Family Influence

Over the years, career researchers have suggested that the influence of the family on career and life planning be given more recognition. As I described earlier (Chope, 2001), Ann Roe (1957) was among the first career theorists to study the role of the family in career decision making focusing, with mixed results, on child rearing determinants of career choice. But I pointed out that it was the "attachment theory" of Bowlby (1982), drawn from family systems theory, that gave career counselors more license to explore the influence of family members in career and life planning. Bratcher (1982) also added perspective to this theme noting that a family's myths, rules and boundaries are among the most influential systemic issues likely to affect one's career. Ulrich and Dunne (1986) further suggested that career change be understood in the context of family dynamics.

Quite clearly, most of us are aware that rigid family rules and traditions about money, prestige, service and success can prevent any of us from taking risks and trying new experiences. My colleagues in college career settings report that "family values" like religion or running the family's business may be among the most important variables to be considered when young people make decisions about career choice.

Most of us know that certain family attitudes and values can adversely affect the career decision making process. Take career indecision, for example. I have written (Chope, 2000) that career indecision is often the result of individuals not receiving much support for the choices that they made in earlier development. Young people who were neglected, reprimanded, physically or emotionally abused, or scoffed at had terrible difficulties when they had to make important life decisions. Their unfortunate histories of criticism led to extraordinary anxiety in developing a life purpose.

In college career centers, counselors report how emotionally demanding it is for students to take majors that are in conflict with the expectations of their parents. How many times have we have heard how art students disappointed their parents by not going into business? Family members sometimes criticize even graduate students in career counseling for entering an occupation that may neither have adequate professional prestige or remuneration.

Family influence can also impact older adults. A number of clients in career transition have reported significant depression due to the fact that their parents hadn't really ever approved of their career choice.

We Need A New Technique

Even though a number of authors have suggested the incorporation of family influence into the career counseling process, their influence has been limited because they did not add any new counseling techniques in this area. No protocol existed to make the information gathering and utilization process an easy one.

The career genogram (Okiishi, 1987) was an early remedy for this dilemma and career

counselors were given a well defined technique that could be easily used to understand the influence of the immediate or even extended family. The genogram also allowed for the exploration of current as well as historical, multigenerational career development patterns. The roles, behaviors, and attitudes of family members along with unfulfilled goals that specific family members had could be discussed with this tool.

The genogram allowed for the study of patterns of success or the lack thereof across generations. Successful and the unsuccessful family members as role models could be considered and discussed. Family patterns of educators, social workers, doctors, lawyers, police officers, and small business owners could be easily identified, along with the institutional pressures of not measuring up to certain family standards.

With a genogram in front of them, career counselors could develop new clinical perspectives and ask new questions.

But Today's Families Are Really Quite Complex

Just as we are beginning to aggressively incorporate the family into career counseling, we are undergoing revolutionary changes in the structure of the family. Traditional patterns of work and family don't fit into some of the current patterns of career choice, easily studied in the genogram. Increases in the number of two-earner families, as well as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender families illustrate the point. Domestic partnerships are being legalized, however slowly. Single adults are raising children in record numbers. Grandparents have become primary providers in numerous urban settings. And, more than a few parents are raising children in their second and third marriage or relationship.

The traditional family, with delineated roles of provider and nurturer is difficult to find, making it more important than ever for counselors to attend to early childhood and adolescent experiences to understand the variables that influence decision making. The National Career Development Association now recommends a greater use of family stories to talk about the unfolding of career choices.

The workplace is also changing. There is an immense amount of instability in the workplace. Dot coms have recently become dot bombs and turned into dot compost. The concept of career is in jeopardy as portfolio careers and project driven work are becoming commonplace.

So What New Technique Can Aid Career Counselors?

Using variables from my own professional experience, I've offered the following two new protocols for counselors to use in gathering information about the impact of the family on career decision making. They are framed using the first two categories of Phillips, et al., (2001): actions of people who want to be involved in the client's process, even if they are not asked and recruitment of people the client wants to ask to help.

Within the two protocols, there are nine separate variables for inquiry by the counselor. Conceivably all nine variables could be put into each protocol. However, to be consistent with the research of Phillips, et al, (2001) and for the purposes of this presentation, I have put four into protocol one and five into protocol two. The protocols are new and deserve some refinement since they are a work in progress. But they represent a new strategy for understanding and

organizing data on the influence of the family in career decision making.

PROTOCOL I: Actions of family members who want to be involved in the client's career decision making process even if they are not asked.

It's a truism that family members do become involved in the career develop process of others even when they're not asked. Career counselors ought to probe about the kind of unsolicited involvement that the family offered. That's probably a place where pressure was placed on the client about family rules of order and tradition.

The first protocol can be framed with the following.

1. Emotional support. You might ask questions like these. How certain were you that you would be given emotional support, no matter what you chose to do? Did the family take a "hands off" but supportive approach to you when you were deciding upon a college, college major, or career path? Or did the ears of the family perk up when you indicated your were going to follow a prestigious path? Answers to these types of questions give information about the level of support and involvement that family members had in the process. Sometimes clients report, "My parents just wanted me to be happy." But was that emotional support or pressure?

It's conceivable that the family chose not to be involved because they were uninterested in the career pursuits of their children or had preconceived limitations of what their children would amount to. This needs to be uncovered by the counselor. I recently worked with a brilliant clinical laboratory technologist who didn't receive her degree and training until after she was 40. She had been a phlebotomist. No one in her family had attended college and her family wanted her to go to work right after high school graduation. She was currently seeing me because she was confronting her family's career belief, nicely inculcated in her, that she could never be promoted into a professional position. She was up for a promotion and didn't want to make a debacle of the interview.

Counselors should know whether the family gave their clients unconditional emotional support, suggesting that they pursue whatever they want. Some clients are given strong emotional reassurance that the family believes in their capacity to achieve. It's important for the counselor to be aware of the fact that the client had others believe in them, a foundation of their self esteem.

Counselors should know if the family that they were never going to be able to get what they wanted gave their clients a message. Did the family criticize the client especially when an opinion was uncalled for? Were the clients told that they weren't going to amount to very much? I often wonder how many bright, creative visionaries, never pursued their dreams because of emotional criticism from the family.

2. Career information. What kind of career related information did the family provide? Did the family help the client generate all different kinds of possibilities and new experiences? What alternatives did the family suggest regarding schools, training or careers?

It's always interesting for college and high school advisors to watch family members at a high school, college information and advising night. Frequently, the family will try to steer their offspring toward those people, schools or situations that they feel are the best for their child. The projected fantasies of the family often outweigh their information base. Career counselors should determine whether there was any "forced guidance", opinions given without

the consideration of the client's thoughts or ideas.

Counselors should also be aware of the family's impressions of particular roles of men and women played in the workforce. How did this affect the client? Men who choose to be paralegals or nurses frequently embarrass some traditional parents because they perceive these roles as work for women.

Finally, what information came from family tradition? Did the family ensure that only particular schools or career paths would be followed because that reflected positively upon the status of the family. I've had many clients who came from small and medium sized family businesses who did not want to pursue these endeavors. Yet the family hammered them with evidence that involvement in the business would be economically prudent as well as beneficial for the family.

3. Tangible support. Counselors should know about the nature of unsolicited tangible assistance like housing, transportation and financial support that the family provided. Did this support carry any ultimatums? That is, were the clients given support, unsolicited as it were, but the family expected some decisions that were consistent with the family's roles and values. I've had many clients tell me that their parents made an unsolicited offer to pay for graduate school as long as the client went to the graduate school or program of their parent's choice. Further, the counselor should be aware of the emphasis the family placed upon the role of money in life and culture?

4. Redirection. Did the family attempt to persuade a student or job seeker away from a particular plan? Sometimes this can be seen as self-serving in the family. For example, a business owner who wants a child to enter business school may resent the fact that the child wishes to pursue film making. An Asian client of mine had to make the rugged choice of not obeying her parents by pursuing a degree in art when the family wanted her to major in accounting. She felt that her education was living of a lie. She eventually received her degree in art, but she enrolled in and failed first year accounting two times.

PROTOCOL II: Recruitment of family members the client wants to ask to help.

Career counselors also need to be sensitive to the manner in which the family responded when the client asked for assistance. Certainly this can sometimes be for self serving reasons. Too, it can be due to the client having a history of never making any decision independently. Some clients don't have experience making a decision alone so, accordingly, they refuse to. But clients usually have good reasons to recruit other family members for advice.

The second protocol can be framed with the following:

1. Fear of making a poor choice. Some clients are terrified of making a bad decision. They may especially fear making a mistake in a work world that's marked with so much turmoil. Company layoffs currently abound. Accordingly, they will usher in the family to develop another perspective on the their career path, to serve as a safety net. Many believe, often wrongly, that with the family's perspective they could make better predictions. Clients may seek familial advice because they are afraid of bringing shame upon the family for a career choice that is inconsistent with the family's culture.

In my experience, using the family in this way may be a reflection of the client's own

self doubt. Clients are often afraid of pursuing their own uniqueness and thus will take a safer path generated by the family. In addition, they have some tendency to compare themselves to others and need the family to help them to believe that they will measure up in a competitive job world.

On another issue the family perspective may be enormously helpful. These are the times when issues of culture and diversity can be explored. Some family members who have suffered the humiliation of discrimination and prejudice may be called upon to give a perspective on how to confront these issues today.

2. Impact of the choice on the family. Some clients want input from their families in order to consider the ramifications that their choice will have for all of the other members of the family. This can lead to harmony in the family. But it can also lead to self-talk, years later that had the client not always looked out for the family, he or she may have had a more satisfying career path.

I worked with a surgical resident recently who said that his parents always wanted him to be a doctor and would have been heartbroken if he had chosen another path. But his younger brother and sister resented his receiving so much attention and family resources. The brother and sister felt cheated that they had to do without so that their older brother could finish medical school. The irony is that my client was considering leaving the practice of medicine.

This case illustrates two points. First it shows that clients can surely explore the nature of the balance between work and family in their own microcosm. As a child goes to a college or community college or vocational technical school, he or she may find that family resources are diminished. The clients quickly learn the value of keeping a balance. These are times where the client can reflect on the contribution that he or she made to supporting themselves and the family in the educational and future career development process.

The case also shows how clients with siblings may choose to discuss issues of birth order. The surgical resident perceived the family very differently than his siblings. Quite clearly, depending upon where the client places in the birth order, there may be very different experiences of fairness. In contrast to the above, a first child who attended college when the family had fewer resources may feel cheated when compared to younger siblings who weren't asked to contribute as much to their educational and career related costs.

3. Family history. All careers are stories and pretty good ones at that. Using the genogram as a resource, I've found it very useful to have clients give me anecdotal information about their parents and grandparents, particularly those who they asked to help. I also like to know what role models existed in the family for the client and whether these were helpful. Awareness of the family history can assist a client in being more flexible, more willing to take different career and educational risks, as the client learns about the different personalities in the family gene line.

There are many places where the family can be very useful in garnering up biographical data about the client as a child and sharing that information. Parents as well as siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles can play a role in this. It may be useful for the client to seek information from a parent when reflecting on particularly momentous occasions such as being taken to work by a parent on National Sons or Daughters Go to Work Day.

Families of origin and extended families that have spent an enormous amount of time

together can give a rich perspective to a client's particular strengths and weaknesses. In making a career choice, bouncing ideas off different family members sharing a common ancestry gives an uncanny, genetic view of what people have experienced in the shadows of the client. Family ideology and the different role models in the family can be explored at this point.

4. Considering alternatives. The family may be useful to the client in weighing alternatives. The client should be able to rely on the trustworthy remarks of another family member. The client can also feel safe in asking specific questions for the purpose of guidance. Family discussions are really beginning models of the networking process.

When the client asks the family to consider an alternative, the client is using the family as a type of personal mirror or "sounding board". This family networking process adds to the social integration of the client and can be a model for how he or she can do this with none family members.

Family members who know the client can help with deciding certain issues like whether a portfolio career might be more appropriate than a single full time job. The decision making stories and examples of other family members who have had these alternative choices can be very useful.

Be aware, however, that the recruitment of people and their perspectives can lead to problems. The client may not be able to assume that support will be available for certain decisions. And as said earlier, some clients may find that it is difficult to ask for support when they are pursuing a path that the family doesn't necessarily agree upon. This may lead to anger, negativity, and a feeling of non-support from the family.

5. Added disruptions. Clients should find out what types of disruptions affected the career development of their parents. They may also want to find out if they had any childhood disruptions that affected their own career development. Disruptions that occur when there is a life style change due to job loss or job enhancement ought to be addressed. Disruptions in the family due to separation or geographical moves can affect how children perceive work. Disruptions can also influence what clients remember about their childhood learning. I've counseled many children of military personnel who uprooted themselves a number of times during their childhood and regret that they never seemed to develop close friends. They say that their memories of early elementary education are often lost.

So Where Can The Family Help The Most In The Future?

There are a variety of places that the family can assist the client in the career decision making process.

First and foremost, the family can listen more and judge less. The family can also help by becoming less focused upon traditional measures of what it means to be successful in the workplace. They can help the client to define success with respect to what seems to matter most to the client as long as the client is acting responsibly.

Second, where appropriate, the family can also support risk taking and new ventures as the client explores alternative career paths. Knowing the past history and career stories of the family, there should be support for pursuing new and uncharted paths. The family might support greater creativity and imagination and get the client to think out of and beyond the box.

Modern society is filled with so much new information that the work world hardly resembles the world that the family knew even a generation ago. In less than a year there's now more information available than was available in a lifetime to the grandparents of many of today's college students. Supportive family members will help to impart new information to clients, material that the client may be oblivious to.

A supportive family will teach the possibility of forging new connections and networks. Drawing from Bowlby, those clients who have developed a sense of connectedness and partnerships through family networking are in a better position to develop stronger social connections and potential employment networks. The family, by example, assists with this and can work to maintain new and developing relationships to help the children.

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